

Rainbow Promise
Genesis 9:8-17
September 10, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

See if this story sounds familiar. You are awaiting the birth of your first child. You have picked out names. You have set up a nursery that is just perfect. Maybe your nursery has a theme – monkeys, or hot air balloons, or rainbows – or you have picked a color for everything so it all matches. Someone has thrown a baby shower, and you have opened box after box of tiny bibs and booties and onesies. All your friends and family are looking forward with you to the blessed event.

Because this is your first baby, you have read every book you can get your hands on about how to be the perfect parent to the perfect child. You can see it all so clearly, just how your life is going to be, how your child is going to be. There is no imperfection in that picture. You will make sure of that.

And then, one day, your perfect vision runs smack into the concrete reality of the human being you have birthed. One day that child turns two and suddenly “NO!” is all you hear. There are not enough hours in the day or enough energy in your body to keep that beautiful nursery pristine. Your own spirit just cannot be large enough every hour of every day to absorb all the chaos that a toddler creates, and one day you just explode. It is not your best moment. It is not at all how you thought you would be as a parent. It is not what you intended. But there you have it. A toddler tantrum followed by one of your own, born not of anger, but of being just overwhelmed by the distance between what you had pictured and the reality you live in every day.

In the brief silence that surely follows, you look at your precious child again. You remember the sweet newborn that you held not so long ago, you recall the perfect milky smell and the sudsy baths in the kitchen sink, and your heart melts once more. The storm is past, and you are bonded in that moment ever-more-deeply to this child you have made, not to the perfect child you imagined, but to THIS child, the one that you are blessed to call your own.

~~~

Today’s scripture is a story like that. We think of it as the story of the great flood, but really, the flood is not the point of the story. It is just the setting for a story about a crisis in God’s own heart, when the perfect creation God had so joyfully made goes so badly astray. God is grieved, deeply grieved that God’s perfect creation has gone so far from God’s intention. At first God sends punishment – a great flood and death and destruction – for all but a remnant: faithful Noah, Noah’s family, and enough animals to repopulate the earth if the waters ever recede. And oh! The rains do come, like God’s own tears. The waters rise. And Noah’s little boat is just floating out there for all it is worth, the last hope of the whole world riding on each wave, everyone wondering if the tears will ever stop, if they will ever see dry land again.

A moment ago, we sang Dave’s favorite hymn, “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise.” Sometimes Dave sings it in the shower. Sometime he hums it as he works. Sometimes we sing it together, and he belts out a glorious baseline. This hymn is part of the soundtrack of my life. Do you remember the third verse? It says, “We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree, and wither and perish, but naught changeth thee.” Nothing changes God, we sang. We are temporary creatures on this earth, but God is eternal and

unchanging. It is a beautiful hymn, but this picture of God as unchanging just does not fit with today's scripture at all.

Because the Bible says that in the midst of the flood, God remembers Noah. God remembers. And in that moment, God changes God's mind. Better, God's HEART is changed. In fact, God is changed BY US. God is grieved by how far we go astray. But – no matter what trouble we get ourselves into – God does not forget us. God is not aloof, holding Godself far off from us. No, this scripture says that after the flood, God recommits to us – not to the perfectly faithful creatures God intended us to be but to the very human people we are. God claims us for God's own, warts and all. And God chooses to renew creation and humankind and to relent from punishing, even when we break God's heart.

At the beginning of this story, God responds to human misbehavior with anger and punishment. Then God remembers us, and God changes, promising never again to destroy the earth and offering the rainbow as a mark of that promise.

The prophet Isaiah says it this way: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, and you are mine. When you pass through the waters, they shall not overwhelm you."

This flood story is a turning point on which the whole history of our faith depends. We are no longer constrained by an angry, punishing God. Instead, God commits to remain with us forever, and we are redeemed – not because we have earned it – but by God's unqualified grace.

Thanks be to God!

Amen